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ABSTRACT

This study examined college choice within the African American community, focusing on how low income African American parents understand the college selection process. The parents studied were trying to help their children make a choice about what college to attend and why to choose it. Data were collected from more than 375 students, parents, and counselors from low socioeconomic schools in the Los Angeles, California area. Eleven participants were parents, ten of whom were interviewed in focus groups, with one parent interviewed individually. Parents were asked about their knowledge of colleges and the college choice process, their understanding of college costs and financing, and their perceptions of the college climate at the University of California. There was a high level of congruence between what parents said and what it was expected that they would say. Parents were concerned about affordability and thus refrained from encouraging their children to apply to many colleges. They relied heavily on school guidance personnel to help their children, because their own experiences did not help them with college selection. Their social class tended to limit their participation and to create a climate in which the students were the primary gatherers of knowledge about colleges. In these families, the children informed and educated the parents, the reverse of what happens in upper income families. Two appendixes contain the interview questions and a list of low socioeconomic status signals for students and parents. (Contains 52 references.) (SLD)

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College Choice on an "Unlevel" Playing Field: How Low Income African American Parents Understand College Choice

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INTRODUCTION

California's Proposition 209, Hopwood vs. the University of Texas and several other recent court decisions have threatened race sensitive admission practices in selective public colleges and universities. In the debates that surrounding the implementation of these measures, legislative opponents of affirmative action pointed to the success of many minorities in gaining access to higher education while claiming that majority students were increasingly becoming victims of "reverse discrimination" (Takagi, 1996). The notion of reverse discrimination emerged during a time when dramatic increases occurred in the number of African Americans enrolled in college. In 1976 slightly over 1 million Blacks were enrolled in college but by 1996 that number increased to 1.5 million (Chronicle, 1997). America's rapidly growing African American upper middle class (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Fulwood III, 1991; Merida, 1995; Roberts, 1995) also caused foes to question the necessity of affirmative action.[1] For example, by 1998 nearly 30% of all Black families reported earning an income of $50,000 a year or more. This situation is far better for two parent Black families of whom 48% earned $50,000 a year or more (Bureau of the Census, 1998, 1999, 2000). However, these affirmative action critics failed to mention that during the same time period a Black underclass developed at similar pace (Wilson, 1987). This underclass mainly consisted of households led by a single African American female. Of such households, 40% were living at the poverty level (Bureau of the Census, 1999).

Given the recent trend against using affirmative action in college admission, and the historical importance of affirmative action to the expansion of the African American upper middle class, it is appropriate to ask several questions. For example, has upper middle class

[1] I use the description "upper middle class" or "upper class" to represent college educated, professional class African Americans and "lower income" to describe high school educated blue collar African Americans. "Poor" and "underclass" describe the working poor or those who depend on public assistance, but they are also considered "low income" for the purposes of this paper.

Black[2] success overshadowed the persistent failure of poor Blacks? Additionally, has not enough attention been paid to the growth of the Black underclass and the negative implications of this growth for Black college attendance? Finally, have affirmative action foes overstated the success of some Blacks and understated difficulties of others with respect to college admission?

What does the African American success look like? In the area of college enrollment it is a story of drastically shifting numbers as Blacks have moved away from Historically Black Colleges (HBCs) into Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The percentage of Blacks enrolled in PWIs grew 87% from 1970 to 1994 (Soul of America, 2001). By 1994 only 16% of all Blacks were enrolled in HBCs (Hoffman, 1996). This mass movement toward higher education helped create the new Black upper middle class. The description of "Black middle class" changed from the local entrepreneurs of the segregated 1950s into the white-collar professionals of today. For example, in 1950 the entire state of Michigan had 196 Black physicians and 95 Black lawyers. In 1990 those figures increased to 1,076 Black physicians and 1,178 lawyers (Sugrue, 2001). Does this mean that in the past few years race diminished as a factor in the lives of African Americans, especially in the area of educational attainment? Anti-affirmative action supporters would say "yes", while middle class Blacks would say that their relative financial advantages have not eliminated occasions where racism continues to be practiced against them (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997).

Others argue that social class, not race, is a more important determinant for Black success. Social stratification theorists have long claimed that social class, defined as socio-economic status or SES, has more impact on educational and social status attainment than race. However, even within this field, scholars have shown that phenotypes such as race have

[2] I alternate between "Black(s)" and "African American(s)" when describing people of African descent in America. Also, Black is left in upper case since it describes a group of people and not a color.

much more to do with educational attainment and social mobility than social class (England, 1984). Whether one believes that race or social class is responsible for life trajectories, it is more accurate to say that both exert influence. For the purposes of this study, however, I was concerned about the intersection of these two social forces and how they impacted the decision of African American teenagers to go to college. The opposing sides of the race versus class debate have painted a confusing and unfocused picture of how these two factors impact African American college access, admission, opportunity, and upward mobility. In an effort to present a more understandable and clear picture of the process of college access, admission, and opportunity my study looks at college choice within the African American community. Specifically, it endeavors to understand how this process works for low income Blacks.

Since the level of educational, economic, and social resources available to students is largely a result of their parent's income, and because parents have an inordinately heavy influence on the college aspirations of their children (Hossler, Vesper, & Coopersmith, 1999), I chose to look at parents. Because I am concerned about the continued upward progress of American minorities I chose to look at African American parents. Finally, in order to focus on the issues concerning low income or underclass Blacks in the area of college choice, this study is about low-income African American parents. I listened closely to what these parents told their children about college application, admission, and attendance and tried to understand what informed this guidance. It is important to consider the participation of low income Black parents in college choice because college admission has become a high stakes game (McDonough, 1994) they may not have adequate resources to play effectively. My study explored the reality faced by low-income African American parents when confronted with the challenge of developing college admission strategies in a context where affirmative action is now considered illegal.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Much of a student's attitudes about education come from his/her family. Parents are by far the greatest influence within the family (Hossler et al., 1999). As the leaders of the family, parents help propel their kids along certain scholastic trajectories. The more involved parents are in their child's education, the more successful they tend to be; less involvement is more likely to produce less success. Parental involvement is influenced by factors ranging from how comfortable parents feel with a child's educational material to the amount of time their work schedules allow for such participation. Another factor affecting parental involvement is the parent's confidence in their ability to help. A confident parent is more likely to offer help while a less confident parent may decide to let the student investigate other information sources independently. Since many low-income children have parents with little or no college experience, how are their attitudes about college application, access, and enrollment shaped? More importantly, how do the parents feel about the quality of information they are able to share?

My study examined the ways in which low income Black parents help their children with the college choice process. I was particularly concerned about the level of parental involvement, confidence, and self-perceived effectiveness. Through this study I explored some of the ways they were involved and what kinds of barriers prevented them from becoming more involved. In order to understand the context these parents operated within, it is important to talk about two areas of related literature. The first area is college choice. What paradigms accurately encompass the college choice process? How have the models of college choice evolved, and most importantly, have these models included experiences specific to African Americans of low income class status? The second area is parent involvement. What has the most recent research found about parent involvement in schooling? What are some of the issues that make parent involvement for African Americans problem free or problematic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The College Choice Process

From the earliest models of college choice to present day conceptualizations, scholars have described the process as having three primary stages. Litten (1982) was the first to develop a three stage model that included: 1) the desire to attend college; 2) the act of investigating the process; 3) actually filling out applications. Around the same time Jackson (1982) offered a nearly identical three stage model that included: 1) developing a preference or attitude toward attending college; 2) developing a choice set of colleges; 3) evaluating the choice set and making a decision. Based on these models Hossler & Gallagher (1987) introduced their model that included similar basic components but explained each stage in much greater detail. Their stages included: 1) the predisposition stage which was the initial decision stage of going to college; 2) the search stage where students selected a group of colleges; 3) the choice stage when an actual college is selected.

Although each stage of college choice appears to be self-explanatory and somewhat pedestrian, the process is deceptively complex. In later versions of the Hossler & Gallagher model, Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith (1989) describe predisposition as a developmental stage where students decide whether or not they would like to continue their formal education beyond high school. During this stage students engage in high level self-analysis while simultaneously processing input from their environment relative to attending college. Hossler et al. (1989) describe the search phase as the construction of a choice set based on pre-determined desirable attributes. Further self-analysis occurs as the student weighs costs, sacrifices, and potential gains or losses. The result is a large primary list of colleges that may vary in size, mission, and selectivity. This leads to the last stage, choice, during which a discrete choice set is established based on what the student perceives are realistic options. It is at this point that powerful influences such as perceived college quality, college

"personality," recruitment, or outreach efforts from school representatives, and financial incentives weigh in on the process. Hossler & Gallagher (1987) and Hossler et al. (1989) offer a model that is very simplistic at a casual glance, but intricate and highly nuanced upon a closer look.

College choice literature supports the fact that parents and parental expectations exert the strongest influence upon educational goals. Generally, the literature acknowledges that Black parents and students value postsecondary education, but empirical studies offer contradictory conclusions. One study shows that minority parents with college education are more likely to want a college education for their children compared to other ethnic groups (Kane, 1994). Freeman's (1998) work also points out that Black parents have always encouraged their children to attend college and that Black women tend to exert more of a positive influence than Black men. This is important because the majority of Black families are led by a single, female parent (Bureau of the Census, 2000). However, it is also important to recognize that the fastest growing population of the Black poor come from such families, a fact that may negatively impact college aspirations (Bureau of the Census, 1999). McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) found that single-parent families lack the educational resources of two-parent families, a deficit resulting in less than satisfactory educational outcomes. Kane's (1994) use of Current Population Survey (CPS) data for 3,000 students from 1977-1988 found that female-headed households had a negative association with prospects for college enrollment. Finally, Freeman (1997) discovered that negative parental messages about college influenced Black adolescents to develop negative attitudes about higher education. Whether the overall influence of low income Black parents is positive, negative, or a combination of both, it is important to understand how parental involvement can influence educational outcomes.

Parental Involvement

Most of the scholarly work concerning parent involvement in education either deals with analysis of formal parent involvement programs or the discovery of certain themes or patterns of interaction. Consequently, this review only includes work that is congruent with parent involvement in college choice. There are three areas within the recent parent involvement scholarly discourse that are relevant to college choice and low income families: 1) parental education level and its impact on parental efficacy; 2) the parental perception of "welcomeness"; 3) structural employment barriers and social barriers.

Parent Education & Efficacy

Parents who have earned college degrees are more likely to be involved in their child's education. The opposite is true of those without college education or even high school education. Lareau & Shumar (1996) found that parents with a high school education or less lacked the knowledge to help their children. In fact, they often risked losing a certain amount of "dignity and authority in the home" as a result of the "unmasking of their limited educational skills" (pp. 25-26). Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) further explained this kind of vulnerability when they found that parents were more likely to be involved in their children's education if they felt that their impact would be valuable. This feeling of efficacy was found to be higher for better educated parents; those with less education were less likely to be involved. For parents, education determines the level of efficacy they feel in matters of their children's education. Education and efficacy were important factors in determining how parents felt they are perceived by high school teachers and administrators.

Parental Perception of "Welcomeness"

The perception parents hold of schools and their professional staffs determined whether they will be involved or disenchanted. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) found schools creating an inviting climate with welcoming school representatives (teachers etc.) had

increased rates of parental involvement. Their data showed that if parents believed the school wanted them to participate, parents were more likely to ignore inhibitions informed by their inner insecurities or distrust. Smrekar (1996) found that school programs that aggressively reached out to parents realized higher levels of involvement. How parents look at schools or, institutions of higher learning has an impact on their desire to become involved. However, there are times when desire to become involved collided head on with economically derived, structural barriers.

Structural Employment & Social Barriers

Given the myriad responsibilities of being an employee, spouse and parent, it is very difficult for all parents to find time to participate in their child's educational activities. Social class exacerbates difficulties in participation. Parents in white-collar professions are more likely to have time than their counterparts in blue-collar work. Lareau & Shumar (1996) found that middle class parents were able to juggle their busy schedules in order to create time to meet with teachers and counselors. Working class parents were "locked" into rigid schedules, which limited their participation in school events. Poor parents had plenty of work flexibility because they were unemployed. However, "the chaos created by poverty prevented their participation in school events "(pp. 26-27). Similarly, Smrekar (1996) found that programs that considered parental work schedules experienced more involvement.

She also found that pro-education social networks increased involvement while anti-education networks decreased involvement and erected social barriers. Social class impacted this finding, as middle class parents were able to discuss school matters in neighborhood social contexts. Lower class parents were less able to participate in this kind of discussion. Stanton-Salazar (1997) described middle class information networks as "seamless" and typified by constant interaction with institutional (school or college)

officials. He felt that the co-equal nature of these interactions is important to note as lower class parents do not interact with schools from the same position of power. The richness of a parent's social network can greatly encourage involvement and can dramatically enhance the usefulness of their knowledge to their children. In the context of college choice, students whose parents are connected to such social networks and are able to enjoy the kind of flexible white collar work conducive to extra-curricular college choice activities tend to produce more advantaged college applicants.

Final Thoughts on Parental Involvement

Parental education level influences the level of efficacy that parents have about being involved in their children education. Parents with higher levels of education enjoy high levels of efficacy, while the less educated have less efficacy and tend to not get involved. If parents feel welcomed, they are more likely to engage with schools; feeling unwelcome does the opposite. Parents with strong pro-education social networks are more likely to stay involved. Middle class parents are more likely to share information about their children's education through their social networks and are even more likely to view school officials as coequals. Finally, structural barriers such as specific kinds of employment are likely to inhibit or encourage involvement.

After reading extensively I both areas, I have determined that parental school involvement is congruent to parent involvement in college choice. Parents who are more knowledgeable about the process or about college generally have stronger levels of efficacy in guiding their children. They would feel that their quality of knowledge about applying, gaining access to, and enrolling in college would be at minimum above average. Low-income parents, on the other hand, would have to feel, at the very least, under-prepared. This guidance may be very good, but the quality of information about college choice specifics would not be the same as that provided by middle class parents. The seamlessness of the middle class social and

educational worlds would help to make any college a welcome or at least familiar place. The disjointed, fractured relationship between the lower income social world and the world of educational makes colleges seem as remote and distant as any other dominant culture institution. Finally, middle class parents are able to enjoy flexible, salaried jobs where they may work from home. This kind of employment is conducive to attending college fairs, college admission presentations, or interviews that tend to occur after school or on weekends. Low-income parents may work evening shifts where the time and perhaps even the mode of transportation (i.e. bus travel) become problematic for college choice involvement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lower income African American parents interact with American institutions, such as higher education, in ways that can be understood from a social class conflict framework. Such a sociological framework exists in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Where Max Weber's (1946) vision of class conflict was tied to the economic interests of different individuals and communities who possess different levels of goods and have different income opportunities, Bourdieu (1998) describes class conflict as a battle between the elite upper class (dominant class) and all other social classes. Although Bourdieu's analysis of class conflict is most appropriate for contemporary France, I will use it for this study of urban American culture. My application of Bourdieu's framework defines the elite/dominant group as those from the extremely wealthy to those from the comfortable upper middle class or upper class. This dominant group has the most wealth, most privilege, and the most effective means of reproducing wealth in ways that circumvent social institutions other social class groups depend upon. For the elite, societal reproduction occurs within the structure of their families (Bourdieu, 1977 & 1998). Relationships are hierarchically arranged with higher status groups, such as the elites, dominating lower class groups. Their domination is solidified by strategies that employ the symbolic power that comes from their privilege to

define high status culture (Bourdieu, 1977; p. 183-184; 1998). This privilege or symbolic power is manifested in "cultural capital"; knowledge, habits, meanings, practices, and values that are used to dominate the lower classes.

> …symbolic capital, which in the form of prestige and renown attached to a family and a name is readily convertible back into economic capital… (Bourdieu, 1977; p. 179)

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is transmitted through an universe of interconnected habits, attitudes, values, and judgments that emanate from an individual's family, neighborhood, and social milieu (Bourdieu, 1998). This interconnected universe is called a "habitus" and is a set of transposable dispositions and outlooks that "help people perceive, judge, and act in the real world" (Wacquant, 1998). While all people have a habitus, only the very wealthy possess cultural capital. Cultural capital is obtained effortlessly and transmitted exclusively through an upper class habitus that articulates values for "people like us" (Bourdieu, 1998; DiMaggio, 1994).

Given Bourdieu's social class paradigm, in America, low income African American families neatly fit the description of a subordinate population. A Bourdieuian argument would say that low income African American families are dominated by the elite of America who use this cultural capital to control the educational domain. In admissions selective colleges are the most highly contested institutions and cultural capital allows members of the dominant population to have a permanent advantage. Their advantage comes from cultural capital which is "the knowledge that elite's value yet schools do not teach" (McDonough, 1997; p. 9).

Since this study involved college choice, the Bourdieu paradigm can help us understand how the dominant group use cultural capital to simultaneously gain and guard access to the kind of higher education that offers the most valuable human capital. As originally

conceptualized by Becker (1993) human capital represents education or training that has direct productivity outcomes in the practice of American business, and in the conduct of daily life. Highly valued human capital, that which confers the greatest financial advantages, is acquired in prestigious selective institutions; the kind of colleges and universities only recently (last 30 years) open to Blacks as a result of affirmative action. Low-income African American parents do not have cultural capital and have difficulty helping their children enroll in such institutions. My study shows that not having this capital prevents them from overcoming barriers the elite class erects to guard against mass access to selective institutions.

For upper income parents and students the process of interacting with institutions is an accepted part of everyday life. Interaction is relatively problem free since such institutions are located within the upper income or dominant class world. Writing about the problematic relationship between working class students and schools, Stanton-Salazar (1997) noted that interacting with these same institutions is problematic for lower income people since they operate in different social class and economic structures. He further argues that the dominant class utilizes a particular discourse and that learning how to use it plays a critical role in future success (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For those from the dominant group, the discourse is understood and taken for granted, but for those of the subordinate classes it is often undecipherable, always frustrating and ends up becoming yet another barrier to overcome.

The effectiveness of a parent and student's social network has much to do with whether or not they are able to access the dominant population's discourse; the gateway to their "culture of power" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar and Bourdieu believe that upper income (middle & upper class) families are more likely to plug into this power source than are working class and poor families. Upper income students are part of a seamless

social structure nestled within the "culture of power." By contrast, the networks of low income students and families is restricted from entering the "culture of power" and its dominant discourse by a series of barriers and borders (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In order to cross these borders, these students and parents must have a bicultural social network orientation that will allow them to interact and communicate effectively at home and school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). A bicultural network orientation describes the ability of those from the lower classes to use one discourse in their home environment while being fluent in an upper class discourse at school or with other institutions.

In helping their children with the college choice process, the low-income African American parents in my study are confronted with situations that would benefit from Stanton-Salazar's bicultural network orientation. If they possessed this orientation their children would have an easier time gaining entry into selective higher education institutions. Given what we know about the value of selective institutions and the prestigious degrees that become Bourdieu's symbolic capital, it is safe to say that children of upper income parents are more likely to lead lives that fit comfortably within the "culture of power."

Stanton-Salazar (1997) also talks about the importance of building allegiances with important institutional agents or representatives as part of a student 's (or parent's) social network. Institutional agents are members of any organization who distribute resources and, in effect, act as gatekeepers who protect institutionally granted advantages. Parents and students nested within the "culture of power" are more likely to benefit from relationships with such agents, while those on the outside must fend for themselves. Low income Black parents and their children are locked outside of the "culture of power" which makes the process of gaining access to the most empowering kind of higher education problematic.

Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) provide an example of what it is like for Black parents not part of the "culture of power." They discovered that Black middle class parents were able to intervene on behalf of their children in a way, "…that educators defined as appropriate and legitimate" (p. 49). By contrast, Black lower income families expressed, "…anger and hostility…" and were "…. not recognized as legitimate" by institutional agents (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; p. 49). Lareau & McNamara Horvat describe legitimate interaction as "moments of inclusion" and illegitimate interaction as "moments of exclusion." The fact that there is any kind of legitimate interaction means that the dominant group has created a standard or benchmark for lower social status or income groups to follow. Bourdieu would say that this is an example of legitimated power that allows the dominant group to impose, "systems of meaning that legitimize and thus solidify structures of inequality" (Wacquant, 1998; p. 217). This study will merge Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital," Stanton-Salazar's ideas about interaction between lower class parents/students and dominant group institutions, and Lareau & McNamara Horvat's "moments of inclusion or exclusion" to evaluate the college choice perspectives of a particular sample of low SES, urban African American parents.

Research Question

The low income Black parents in this study were involved in trying to help their children make a choice about what college to attend and why. My concern is for what kind of guidance exists and how the theoretical base of cultural capital, lower class interaction with schools, and moments of inclusion or exclusion shape the parent's perceptions. Therefore my primary research question asked:

How do low-income African American parents advise their children about college choice?

In the process of dispensing advise, this group of parents faced challenges inherit in being members of a subordinate population attempting to understand a dominant population institution. I argue that Stanton-Salazar's ideas about the seamlessness of middle class social worlds and institutions and the barriers that low income people find between these worlds are present in the college choice process. This fissure produced several sub questions. First, I examined if this group of parents had a clear vision of how the college choice process works. Secondly, I was interested in seeing if the knowledge they dispensed was helpful to their children. Finally, I asked how these parents perceived their position of power with respect to the high school and higher education.

Data, Research Design, & Methodology

Data Source

In the summer of 1998 Professor Patricia McDonough led a group of researchers and graduate students on a project that sought to understand the state of college admission for African American and Latino students in urban California settings after the passing of Proposition 209. Los Angeles, a city that is as large and densely populated as it is diverse, was chosen for the study setting. The data collection involved students, parents, and counselors from high schools with large Black and Latino populations. As part of this project, African American and Latino high school students, parents, and their high school counselors were interviewed individually or in focus groups. The data collection for the project occurred between August 1998 and February 1999. This data is the source of my study.

Site Selection

Los Angeles (LA) was chosen for this study because in many ways it represents "ground zero" for the ongoing demographic boom called "Tidal Wave II" (Breneman, Estrada, & Hayward, 1995). In the mid-1990s California education policy researchers predicted a

nearly 30% increase in college enrollment. We are presently in the first stages of this demographic movement, much of which is occurring in the Los Angeles area also known as the "LA Basin." In the last several years, 49% of all enrolling freshmen in the UC came from the LA Basin. In addition, 48% of all Blacks and 47% of all Latinos in California live in the L. A. Basin (UCOP, 1998). For the overall study, approximately 20 high schools were chosen then separated by their percentage of non-White students, UC eligible students (UC Freshman Admission Handbook, 2000-2001), and the number of students who took the SAT or ACT test. These criteria were employed to not only isolate schools which had high Latino and Black populations but give the researchers the opportunity to include both highly prepared and unprepared students from these groups. It was assumed that these groupings would produce students and parents presenting a cross section of their particular communities.

Data Collection

At the culmination of the data collection process over 375 individuals were interviewed and categorized into three groups (**student, parent, counselor**) and into two modes of data collection (**focus group interviews**, **in-depth semi-structured individual interviews**). In some interview transcripts, individual researchers added **audio or written fieldnotes, memos, and impressions** about experience or reactions to a specific school or experiences at the school.

Analytical Categories

Demographic data from the University of California (1997-98) were used to make a blunt cut between high SES schools and low SES schools. I chose to separate the populations by looking at the percentage of students whose families were part of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) federal assistance program for the poor and working-poor. Schools from our sample with less than 25% of their students on such programs were

considered hi income (low AFDC) schools and those with more than 25% on public assistance were considered low-income (high AFDC) schools.

School Selection & Sample

W. J. Clinton High School was selected for this study[3]. Clinton High School is located in South-Central Los Angeles and enrolls around 1200 students, most of who are African American (80%) and almost half of who are on public assistance (44.5% AFDC). This is considered a low SES school because of its student population and surrounding area. In addition, only 60% of the students completed the minimum requirements to even be considered for admission into the University of California (UC) and only 2% of the seniors were enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses. Almost all of 11 parents were interviewed either in focus groups that contained between 3 and 5 people. One parent was interviewed individually. Of the 11 parents, 8 were women and only 1 parent had earned a bachelor's degree.

Questions

Parents, who were interviewed individually or in focus groups of 5 or less, were asked 15 questions in a semi-structured format about college access and college choice. The first set of questions dealt with their actual college knowledge, college information sources, application processes, admission standards, and the current admission climate post-Proposition 209. Next, they were asked to share their perceptions about college costs and college financing. The questions also to ask for their opinions about the campus climate at the University of California and closed with a discussion of their suggestions for improved outreach (see Appendix A).

[3] W. J. Clinton High School is a pseudonym used to protect the school's anonymity.

Analysis

Included as primary data sources are interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and memos from individual and focus group interviews. In addition, analytical memos and constant comparison of emerging themes were considered. I utilized the Glaser & Strauss (1967) constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis that began with a laundry list of themes that were condensed into broad thematic groups. The result is theory that emerged from categories or themes created by and grounded in the data.

Although 25 "organic" codes emerged from the data, I also filtered it through a set of criteria built from college choice and access literature for parent and student behaviors based on social class (see Appendix B). I called these criteria "signals" and developed one set each for low income and high-income students and parents. For this study only low-income signals were used. These signals were critical because they represent what the literature says about the connection between low income and college choice. Through analysis of the data I compare findings from past research with my findings in order to see if the two are consistent. Any discrepancy in the findings helped move my analysis in the direction of looking for alternative explanations and, eventually, new theory.

FINDINGS

Introduction to Findings

My findings are separated into three sections. The first gave me an idea of how congruent my sample of low-income African American parents was with what I call low-income college choice signals. These signals represent college choice behavior we would expect from low-income parents overall (See Appendix B). Created from research on college choice and parent involvement, these signals were constructed in order to compare practices and outlooks of my sample of low-income Black parents. These findings represented the voices of parents that helped me understand how they situate themselves in the process of

helping their children apply to and attend college. The second section spoke to the salience of race for these parents and how their experiences as African Americans impacted the kind of guidance given to their children. The last section used the theoretical lens provided by Bourdieu, Stanton-Salazar, and Lareau & McNamara Horvat to add a deeper meaning to what our parents describe. This sociological framework gave me an understanding of how this set of parents negotiated the demand of providing guidance even without having the kind of college information that would help their children gain admission into a selective college.

Findings: Low SES Signals

After comparing Clinton HS interviews with low income college choice signals I found a high level of congruence between what parents said and what we expected to hear given their social class and income level. The first congruency dealt with concerns over cost. Most parents are concerned about finances, but literature tells us that cost may have a more chilling effect on the college attendance of low-income children (Flint, 1992). Parents from my study expressed this concern with respect to application costs.

> This lady wants them to apply for at least 16 (colleges) and I said, "you're not paying for that." That's 16 times 55; that's a lot of money. We narrowed her down to five and we said, "after we get these five, then you can apply maybe for a couple more."

One of the college choice strategies used by upper income students is to apply to many selective colleges with the hopes that more than half will turn into admission offers (McDonough, 1994). It is clear from this parent's response that she would not be able to use this strategy in the most advantageous way because of prohibitive costs. Another practice used by advantaged families is taking college aptitude tests numerous times to post higher scores. Higher scores make their children more attractive to selective, prestigious colleges, but parents from my sample often struggle to pay for a single examination.

> I have been off work on disability. And sometimes there wasn't a fee waiver and at the time they would ask (for) $50 and at the same time she wanted the ACT test and the SAT. All about the same time. And monies had to come in about the same time. So, it was a little bit strange.

As a result, her child may not be able to partake of the multi-test strategy. This strategy is one part of what McDonough (1994) calls "the commodification" of college applicants developed from strategies that are an understood part of an upper income student's process. Unfortunately, parents from Clinton HS are not in the position to be able to play in this part of the college choice game.

Another typical college choice behavior for low-income families is their heavy reliance on school guidance personnel (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Upper income parents are more likely to guide their children from their past experience or that of people in their social networks. Clinton HS parents do not have this experience and, therefore, are dependent upon school resources.

> She's a senior and well… my advice, I usually get it from her teachers, from Miss Shivers, the principal, and I also get most information here at Clinton from Miss Wash, she's been a great help. Also, Miss Rivers the parent rep, and Miss Tally in the career center. My daughter goes in there and assists (also and they gave her a lot of information.

McDonough (1994) refers to "college knowledge" as "information about college choice and admission standards" that has become a commodity in a competitive admission climate (p. 443). The college knowledge this mother has access to originated from outside her family and from Clinton HS faculty, counseling, and guidance staff. Along with reliance upon guidance personnel, restrictions placed on parents by rigid work schedules represents another signal. In my sample, blue-collar lifestyle restrictions inhibited parental involvement. Clinton HS parents experienced conflicts between having to chose between potential hourly wages earned and participation in the child's college choice activities.

> I don't know how he (the son) lost out on his scholarship. Because I worked at the time and his mom, she works.

This parent's lament gives a glimpse into the kind of conflicts that ensue as a result of blue collar work schedules. Lareau & Shumar (1996) tell us that restrictive work schedules make it difficult for parents to leave early to be involved in college choice activities. Most college choice activities are held on evenings and weekends; times that present serious conflicts for low income parents. Clinton HS parents have to make an extra effort to know the kind of things that upper income families take for granted; knowledge that is part of their cultural capital. Not having this information exposes the frailty of Clinton HS parent's college information networks. Lareau & Shumar (1996) found that low-income parents have less sophisticated and thin education networks compared to their upper income counterparts. As a result, low-income parents are often left out of the college choice information loop.

> I'm, like I said, unfortunately for myself, I'm kind of like a little late coming, but I don't think it's too late and I still think that there is a lot of information that I can use.

Other parents from the sample rely on clergy and friends who were not experienced with college affairs. From these sources, children are able to get encouragement, but limited usable college choice information or college knowledge.

> (I get information from) our pastor, and different friends, everybody who sees her says that she would do well.

Clergy and friends could be powerful sources of information in an upper income community, but in the impoverished area that surrounds Clinton HS it is unlikely to be of great help for students applying to selective colleges. Finally, while high-income parents incorporate college knowledge products (McDonough, 1994) such as guidebooks, internet

access of college sites, and private counselors, the parents in my sample never mention such items as information sources. Most of their information comes from their own social networks or what the children brought home from school.

Overall, I found what I expected, namely that parents from low-income backgrounds exhibit behaviors congruent with what college choice literature would predict. To a large extent, social class structured college choice expectations and behaviors exhibited by these parents; a reality that in turn impacted their ability to be helpful to their children in a competitive admission climate.

Findings: The Salience of Race

Although it is clear that social class structured how they were able to participate in college choice, race was still important to these parents. My interviews took place in Los Angeles, California in the first year after Proposition 209 took effect and Clinton HS parents were demonstrative about their feelings of anger and betrayal toward the University of California (UC). For Clinton HS parents the passage of Proposition 209 was a clear statement that their children were no longer "wanted."

> But after this transaction (Prop 209) went down its like they take away our rights and put us in a corner and said that "we're not good enough." So when he looks (at the UC) he is like, "just leave it alone, he doesn't have to apply."

Another parent spoke of how the playing field was less level without affirmative action and how disappointing this was for his family.

> Nah! It's not fair! Give these children just like the brother said a level playing field.....this should be a level playing field. This what I'm talkin' about a level playing field for everybody

The outrage expressed by parents led them to give encouragement in a way that recalled the trials and tribulations of the Black experience in America. Their recollection was summoned by parents to inspire their children to pursue a college education even in the face of obstacles erected by legislation such as Proposition 209.

> I said, "when I was a little girl or when I was a teenager, Black people didn't have the opportunities that they have today." I said, "so therefore you should get all that you can get…"

Some parents mentioned that their children were being pursued by NCAA Division I athletic teams. Dreams of becoming a star athlete have derailed many young African Americans off the tracks toward academic excellence. Parents expressed concerns about their being carried away by the "celebrity" that goes along with being a prized athletic recruit.

> And academically, I said, "What, what the system has done is to make Black kids think they can only get on (athletic) scholarships." Athletics! But your brain, you have a brain, I said, "and Black people are not only known for music and dancing." I said, "you have a brain that you can use." (African American) People have been taught, "well you, you can't do this."

This parent invoked history and her own lived experience to provide encouragement for her daughter. She effectively communicated the message that Blacks are capable of excelling in intellectual endeavors. Her awareness of how African Americans are situated in an ongoing battle against the dominant group for finite resources was obvious in her statement. She challenged the notion that Blacks can't excel in school and called upon her child to defy this stereotype. Her goal was to empower her daughter and inspire her to achieve in college. For the parents of Clinton HS, race shaped how advice was given and caused them to encourage academic achievement as a form of rebellion against the dominant group.

Findings: Ties to Theory

Bourdieu (1986) has carefully outlined how domination and inequality can be inflicted upon subordinate groups by perpetrators who use their power to define legitimate culture, tastes and reality. According to him, there are three forms of cultural capital, embodied, objectified, and institutional. Of the three, institutional capital is of most interest to this study. Essentially, it is institutional recognition of a person's caliber or qualifications due to graduation from the "right" colleges. For the purposes of my study, institutional capital will be interchangeable with the parallel notion of symbolic capital (Bourdieu; 1977, 1986). In this version of class confrontation and competition, the dominant population aggressively monitors access to the most empowering kind of education (McDonough, 1997). Since they have the only legitimate and most valuable cultural capital and because access to selective colleges represent a finite commodity, the process of college choice is highly contested.

Cultural Capital & Clarity

Since access to selective institutions is such a competitive process, upper middle class families (the dominant population) instinctively use strategies that maximize their cultural capital. For the most part, this knowledge is obtained in an effortless way and dispensed in an every-day manner (DiMaggio, 1994). Parents of W. J. Clinton High School students, however, do not have the means to utilize such strategies. For Clinton HS parents college choice is a process that is unclear and almost always confusing.

> It, it's, it's, why is it such a maze? Why do they want you to go through these mazes? Why can't they just tell you?

This mom is utterly confused and frustrated by the process and her lack of clarity about college choice translated into limited understandings about what strategies can even be implemented. Again, the rules of the game are unclear and unfocused. It makes sense then, that frustration forms the perception that someone or some group is hiding information.

> They have a lot of hidden secrets. You have to search for the information. If you don't search, you don't get it.
>
> They're not having enough classes that brings this knowledge to our attention, regardless of whether you feel you need the help..."

These parents want to be more helpful, but important information seems beyond their grasp. The lack of clarity is a problem that is complicated by not knowing where to look or not knowing the landscape enough to know what exists. W. J. Clinton parents see information as hidden from them while "others" are well aware of and regularly utilize college choice knowledge to their advantage. It makes sense that the group parents identify as "they" is their way of identifying the dominant population. They feel that the dominant group withholds information they need to help their kids.

The information that low-income African American parents seek is the cultural capital they are not allowed to possess; not having it is the most essential part of their domination in the context of college choice. These parents knew where to search for information it would not be considered "hidden." If this parent had access to the information they needed the dominant population or those parents identified as "they" would not be guilty of withholding.

Accessing Institutional Agents by Themselves

Stanton-Salazar (1997) noted that before accessing the "dominant culture of power," working class youth have to enlist the help of important institutional agents or those who distribute resources and act as gatekeepers. The parents in my study were largely unable to locate or acquire the help of such powerful agents for their children. Clinton HS parents did not feel comfortable dealing with this culture of power even though the institutional agents were also African American. This perception speaks to the power of dominant culture institutions to exclude those from the lower classes even if the representatives of

such institutions are of the same race. Although parents felt excluded they never mentioned attempting approaching a Clinton HS counselor, teacher, or administrator to remedy the situation.

> They really don't want, don't care for the parents to go along with the kids and I think parents should have an opportunity to take those trips, field trips with the children so we can learn more.

Due to their discomfort accessing agents within the culture of power, the parents in my study were largely unable to locate or acquire help for their children. My interviews and focus groups contained references to family, friends, or work associates who were connected to key Clinton HS or higher education personnel. However, not having access to people who directly determine the fate of their kids put an extra burden on their kids. The children become responsible for getting their own information, Stanton-Salazar would say that they had to negotiate barriers and borders alone.

> But, I don't get it from (the) counseling staff, I get it from her (daughter). Not saying that if I went to them more often or more frequently I wouldn't get it, but it's just not made available to me like it should be.

Since parents were not able to help negotiate borders (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) between their world and the world of access-granting institutional agents, students had to make their own connections. Herein lies the problem, low income children lack the skills, habits, and informal knowledge to consistently mediate these two social worlds on their own. Since Clinton HS parent's are not clear about the college choice process, and since they are unable to access others who could be of assistance, children have to fend for themselves.

Beyond not being able to negotiate borders, I found that Clinton HS parents were at a loss when it came to knowing the kind of discourse to use with institutional agents. There was an identifiable tension when certain parents shared their perceptions about the treatment that

they received from high school counselors, teachers, and administrators. It was clear from their responses that they felt disconnected and out of information loop.

Exclusion and the Wrong Discourse

Lareau & McNamara Horvat (1999) identified moments of inclusion as places in time when students and parents used the right discourse to gain access to institutional resources. Moments of exclusion occurred when students and parents did not use the correct discourse necessary to gain access to resources. In my study, Clinton HS parents seemed to experience more moments of exclusion than inclusion.

> "They withheld a lot of information, my son don't even know about trips or nothin' that they goin' on or nothin'. (They play favorites) with their little pet students, that's what I'm talking about...its not fair!"

This parent's moment of exclusion stems from the information that he perceives other students are getting that his son is not. Perhaps there was no way for this father to be involved, but it is also likely that he was not aware of his right to intrude and insist that his son be included on the field trips. It is also possible that even if presented with the opportunity to dialogue with Clinton HS counselors or administrators, he would not know the correct discourse to use in order to bring about a positive result. Lareau & McNamara Horvat found that high school officials perceived the unaware Black parents as belligerent and irrational. Judging from the tone of his comments, this Clinton HS father could possibly be perceived in the same way.

Using sociologically based theories helped deconstruct the central issues in college choice for Clinton HS parents. They are not clear on what needs to be done in order to help their children access the most desired schools. Their lack of clarity, in part, is a product of not having cultural capital and not knowing how to interact with the high school's key

administrators. The end result is that their children become the primary information gatherers; in a sense they are left alone to fend for themselves.

However, Clinton parents offer strong motivation and encouragement by calling attention to the importance of education for African American people. As members of a subordinate population, parents tell their children to vigorously pursue higher education and take advantage of opportunities not available to past generations. Clinton HS parents are more able to comfortably give encouragement than they are able to give specific college choice advice. Like low income parents of all races, they are highly concerned about costs, highly reliant on school personnel for information, restricted from college choice involvement by their blue-collar lifestyles, and prevented from accessing the most effective kind of information sources (informal sources).

CONCLUSIONS

The data clearly supported the notion that social class informs parental approaches to college choice, but supports race as a salient factor. In the case of low-income African American parents, social class tends to limit their participation and construct a dynamic where the students are the primary information gatherers. Race is salient in the exhortations and encouragement they give their children. All of the parents in my sample believed strongly in their children's ability, and in some cases, were amazed at how confidently they pursued their goals. Nevertheless, the children inform and educate the parents; a reversal of how the process works in upper income families.

Parents are unable to provide helpful information and this was a clear frustration. They were unable to share information which is accurate, timely, and of high value for their offspring's college choice process. Clinton HS parents were more often confused than confident about college admission, financial aid, entrance requirements, and fundamental

college realities. The confusion stemmed from not having college experience nor having enough quality sources in their social networks to compensate. Beyond being confused, parents felt purposefully excluded. This exclusion is another element that constructs a barrier between institution and parents that is perceived to originate from a malevolent or ill-willed "they" or dominant population. Ironically, in their specific neighborhood context, this dominant population was African American, and the institution was filled with Black institutional agents. So is social class and income level more significant than race for Clinton HS parents? Although this study was not designed to compare and contrast the effects of each, I argue that the data show that both are significant.

The level of significance of either factor depends upon the context of an individual parent's reality. The significance of either factor may change depending upon the level of analysis. For example, at the micro level the fact that college-bound Clinton HS students gather most of their information may be indicative of a highly motivated student who is driven to success. At the macro level, however, the fact that the student assumes this burden may be symptomatic of a larger class-based pattern. If there was a consistent behavior pattern of college-bound students from this neighborhood not asking parents for help with college choice electing to get the information on their own the impact of social class be easily detected. These students may have chosen not further burden their parents with additional requests that add to plates already full with responsibilities. Using the same scenario, the influence of race may seem positive at the micro level for a highly motivated Clinton HS Black teenager who has the support of important staff or faculty (most of whom are Black). But race can quickly become a negative factor when Clinton's limited resources and dependency on institutions such as the UC make them vulnerable when affirmative action is ruled illegal. Before Proposition 209, programs that gave preferential treatment to on the basis of race helped Clinton HS, without such programs their efforts are hindered. Analysis at the macro level shows race to be an important consideration in how this school helps

students choose colleges especially those which are selective. It is safe to say that both class and race are important for Clinton HS parents and children. Although my study explored the intersection of these two factors, there are several limitations that may inspire other scholars to conduct further inquiry.

LIMITATIONS

The biggest limitation of this study is that the data used were collected for a different of study. I used responses to a protocol designed for a larger study and analyzed the resulting data for my research question. A purely ethnographic approach would allow me to go much deeper in terms of understanding the perspectives of parents and allowing their responses to be revealed in multilayered, complex terms. Secondly, because since this is part of a larger paper, it is still a work in progress. In the future I plan to examine a sample of upper income African American parents and use similar protocol to answer the same research question. Finally, the blunt cut that determined the low income parent sample could be more accurately done with data collected specifically for my question.

IMPLICATIONS

The most important result of this project was identifying specific perceptions of the college choice process held by low income African American parents. It is especially critical since the findings point to the need for more aggressive outreach to low income parents who are left out of the loop because of their lack of college knowledge or their blue collar lifestyles. Currently the arguments used for the creation of affirmative action in the 1960s have been turned on their heads and characterized as discrimination in the late 1990s and early 2000s have been equated with discrimination. Lost in this turn of events and sabotaged definitions is the fact that there are still plenty of low income African Americans who will lose the opportunity to attend selective institutions, thereby missing out on the opportunity to move away from poverty and closer to parity with other American ethnic groups. It is my hope that this study will be used in the college choice dialogue especially for those interested in

creating new affirmative action initiatives or other similar legislative efforts. Finally, my study will hopefully add depth complexity to our understanding about how factors like race and class impact the African American community.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

College Knowledge & Information Sources & Post 209 Admission Climate

1. Which colleges have your students thought about applying to? Why?

2. Who have you talked to about your student going to college? Probes include: neighbors, friends, relatives, church members, teachers

3. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of the University of California (UC) compared to other colleges on their list.

4. Tell me a little bit about what you've heard about the changes in affirmative action at UC.

5. Has that affected whether you would encourage your student to apply to or accept admission to the UC?

College Requirements & Application Process

1. What is required to apply and be admitted to the University of California?

2. Who have you talked and what have you heard about taking the ACT, PSAT, SAT, or the SAT II?

3. Can you think of a creative way in which the UC can provide information to high school students and families about requirements for admission?

Perceptions About College Costs

1. Can you tell me what you know about financial aid for college?

2. How much do you think tuition is at the UC?

3. How, if at all, have the changes in affirmative action affected how much financial aid is available to students?

Campus Climate

1. What do you think UC campuses are like?

2. Do you think students of color would feel comfortable on a UC campus?

Appendix B
Low Socioeconomic Status Signals (from the College Choice Literature) For Students and Parents

* More concerns about costs, rules, and regulations (Litten, 1982)

* As family income decreases there are accompanying decreases in the prestige, variety, and distance away from home of the colleges selected by students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987)

* Students are more likely to depend on high school guidance counselors (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987)

* Increased concerns about costs (Flint, 1992)

* Less flexible work schedules which impact involvement in college choice activities (Lareau & Shumar, 1996)

* Frail or fragile education networks (Lareau & Shumar, 1996)